

Chapter 1003

Once again. (3)

«Ugh, ugh... ugh... ugh!»

The sky is yellow.

Namgung Dan realized that describing the sky as yellow wasn't a figure of speech. The sky before his eyes was genuinely yellow.

No, it wasn't just the sky.

«Ugh... ugh...»

Everything in front of him was gradually changing to yellow. To be precise, it felt like the colors of the world were fading away.

«Ugh...»

At that moment, Namgung Dan's foot caught on a rock. He couldn't muster the strength to resist, and his body almost toppled forward.

No, it nearly did.

«Ugh!»

But before his body could fully tilt, someone who had come running beside him grabbed his shoulder and helped him straighten up.

«...»

Namgung Dan looked at the person standing next to him with vacant eyes. Was it Yoon Jong...?

He grinned and said as if it was almost a disaster.

«You still seem to have some strength left, but you shouldn't fall over so soon. Come on, let's keep running with all your might.»

«...»

«Hmm? Is there a problem?»

«Th-thirsty.»

«Yes?»

Namgung Dan's hand weakly reached forward.

Gulp. Gulp. Gulp. Gulp.

And like a marionette with tangled strings, he staggered forward again.

'Why did it come to this?'

Yes, it started very simply...

«A bet?»

«Yes.»

Chung Myung grinned and said,

«Since you said you want hospitality and respect, just asking for it without reason seems a bit unconvincing. Let's see if you have the qualifications to receive respect.»

«...»

«If you win, I'll refund all the money I took from you, and from now on, I won't lay a finger on you.»

«R-really?»

«In return, if we win, you won't make any complaints and do as I say. Simple, right?»

Namgung Dan looked at Chung Myung with a cautious expression.

«But, Dojang...»

«Ah, I understand.»

Chung Myung waved his hand as if he knew what Namgung Dan was going to say. It looked like he was swatting away an annoying fly.

«I know what you mean. I have a conscience too, you know. Do you think I'd challenge you to a fight?»

«W-well...»

«The kids will do it.»

Chung Myung pointed to the Five Swords behind him.

“And since something like martial arts would make the outcome too obvious, let's make it fair. Fair.”

“Fair...?”

“Yes.”

With a loud clap, Chung Myung continued,

“Running.”

“...”

Namgung Dan's face, initially taken aback, turned dumbfounded. But Chung Myung casually went on.

“The rules are simple. You start running from your side, and our kids will chase you. Whoever gets caught is eliminated. If by the sunset, there's still someone on your side who hasn't been caught, you win.”

“No, but...”

“However!”

Before Namgung Dan could say anything, Chung Myung interrupted.

“Since that seems a bit too uncertain, on our side, we'll each carry a twenty-kilogram weight on our arms and legs.”

At this, the faces of Namgung Clan's swordsmen contorted in anguish.

“...Are you disrespecting us?”

“Hmm? Was that too much? Alright then, we'll add another ten kilograms to your bodies.”

“Dojang!”

Namgung Dan shouted before he realized it himself.

«Ay, why are you shouting like that?»

Chung Myung picked his ear with a pinky finger blew on it.

«If you're scared, you don't have to do it.»

«I will!»

«Dan-a!»

«Hyung-nim!»

Namgung Dan brushed off his younger martial siblings.

«Just make sure to keep that promise!»

Chung Myung chuckled.

«You're speaking for me now. Just make sure you keep your end of the bargain.»

The Namgung family's martial artists looked at Namgung Dan with a mix of concern.

«Is this really okay?»

«Well...»

«That's enough!»

Namgung Dan interrupted the others.

«No matter how our Namgung's prestige may not be based on martial arts, will there be any excuse if we get caught by these guys carrying those weights? And they have to catch all of us to win, right?»

«...»

«Are you going to endure being disrespected to this extent?»

The Namgung family's swordsmen had cold expressions.

Namgung Dan, who had witnessed their determination, watched as they firmly resolved themselves and aimed for the victory.

‘There should be a limit to arrogance.’

Perhaps if they had suggested a duel with swords, he wouldn't be this angry. However, they chose to compete not with martial arts but with their inner strength and endurance.

Isn't this the field where Namgung family is most confident in?

«Dojang is undoubtedly impressive, but this time, you were arrogant.»

«Huh. As expected, the world is vast. There are still people willing to point out my arrogance.»

«.....»

«But shouldn't you say such things after winning?»

Namgung Dan, looking at Chung Myung's smirk, nodded while grinding his teeth.

‘It was like that...’

The first inkling that something might be wrong came when they stood at the starting line.

It was Hwasan Joeng Geom, carrying iron plates on both arms and legs, who voiced the question to Hwasan Geomhyeop as they walked.

— What should we do?

— Crush them.

— Understood.

It was a strange feeling.

Even though he did know Hwasan Geomhyeop, he didn't think Hwasan Jeong Geom was someone who should underestimate them. However, when he casually engaged in that conversation, an ominous feeling brushed his chest.

But Namgung Dan pushed that thought aside. No matter what, he considered it impossible to catch up to them with over 80 kg of iron plates on their bodies.

Speaking of 80 kg, that weight was equivalent to one person. Was it even possible to catch up to someone running ahead while carrying another person on your back?

That's why Namgung Dan didn't hesitate. He saw it as an opportunity to flatten the nose of Hwasan Geomhyeop. And also as an opportunity to show Namgung Dowi, who remained silent throughout all these events, what was right.

When they had just set off, their determination remained unwavering. Even when the disciples of Hwasan started chasing them a short while later, it was the same. Ogeom couldn't close the gap that Namgung had initially created — all they could do was follow. However...

A little while later, the Namgung swordsmen realized why Hwasan had insisted on the condition that they be pursued until sunset.

Just as half an hour passed, those chasing them began to pick up their pace.

Being pursued by individuals who carried 80-pound metal plates on their entire bodies? This was not a matter that their pride could allow.

The swordsmen of Namgung Clan, who felt a sense of crisis, ran as if their lives depended on it.

And from that moment on, hell began.

— Gee, you're too slow.

— Oh, come on, hurry up!

— When did you last boil turtle stew?

Those crazy Hwasan disciples, after sticking closely behind them, began poking their backs. These individuals, who were practically encircling a single person, casually offered words of encouragement as they stuck to their backs with all their might. How could anyone remain sane in such a situation?

— No, you shouldn't give up already!

— You still have more in you!

— Stay strong!

They would rather be mocked and cursed at than pitied, those damn people.

So, Namgung clan ran as if their legs were about to fall off within the «consideration» of Hwasan's disciples. This was no longer a matter of victory but a matter of pride.

But from the point when an hour passed, people started foaming at the mouth and collapsing.

«Gurgle.»

«Hehe. One down here.»

«Ugh, ugh!»

«Ah! Don't puke!»

What made them go crazy the most was that Hwasan's disciples pursuing them appeared perfectly fine, without showing any signs of exhaustion.

Namgung Dan, with his head as heavy as lumps of lead, struggled to lift it forcefully. Figures scattered here and there came into view.

Complete annihilation. A clean sweep.

The proud descendants of Namgung, who had survived until the end even in the war against the Surochae, were now lying here in this open field like sick chickens.

'How... how did it come to this...'

With his head hung back, Namgung Dan stretched out his foot, sobbing softly. They were the descendants of the Namgung lineage, confident that their heritage's purity was unmatched by any martial sect in the world. Their unwavering perseverance from childhood through intense training should have set them apart from other sects.

So why did they end up like this?

'Ugh, ugh...'

Vomit suddenly gushed out, and Namgung Dan instinctively covered his mouth with both hands.

He couldn't afford to show himself in such a state, no matter what.

'I... I feel like I'm going to die...'

Now, there was no room to discuss the color of the sky or anything of the sort. Every time he lifted his feet, his limbs moved independently, and every time his feet touched the ground, his body folded and unfolded itself.

Then, a voice behind him, taunting, reached his ears.

«It seems like it's over for us here too.»

«No. I think we can go a bit further, don't you?»

«Then let's make a bet. Hold out a bit longer or can't hold out. I'll bet on 'can't hold out.'»

«...I'll bet on 'can't hold out' too.»

«Come on, what's that supposed to mean?»

«If it's a bet, we should make a cold-blooded judgment.»

Those words nearly severed Namgung Dan's faint remaining will.

Nevertheless, he kept running. There was a reason he had to keep running.

«Cheer up!»

With every step he took, his field of vision changed, and a familiar face appeared.

'Soso... Soso...'

Seeing her looking at him and sticking out her tongue turned Namgung Dan's thoughts into chaos.

‘How... how could Soso...’

Tang Soso he knew had nothing to do with martial arts. Every time he interacted with her family, her appearance had been that of a dignified lady from a prestigious household, hadn’t it?

Yet, that Soso was now following him with an unparalleled expression, cheering him on at his side.

‘Crazy...’

Thud.

In the end, Namgung Dan’s body, unable to hold on any longer, met the ground.

Collapsed, his face down into the earth, he trembled violently. He was breathing harshly inhaling the dust, but he couldn’t even muster some strength to turn his head.

His entire body felt as if it had been relentlessly pounded by a massive club. This was beyond describing as merely difficult or agonizing. Had he ever in his life reached such a state through training alone?

«No, you can’t endure two hours?»

«... We weren’t running particularly fast.»

«Soso, what’s happened?»

«Why are you asking me like that? It’s not like I’m your senior disciple!»

The voices whispering nearby didn’t quite reach Namgung Dan’s head.

His mind felt heavy, as if submerged in water. It seemed like he could sleep forever if he closed his eyes right now.

But...

Amidst this extremely bizarre situation, Namgung Dan could still hear clearly. He could distinctly hear the sound of someone’s footsteps approaching from behind.

Tock. Tock. Tock. Tock.

He struggled to lift his eyelids.

«Tsk.»

He felt someone gently nudge him with their foot, and then his vision was suddenly filled with the clear blue sky. The sun was directly overhead.

In one corner of that azure sky, someone’s face suddenly appeared.

A face with a distinct grumpy expression...

«Hey.»

«...»

«You regret not running another hundred li at the start?»

«...»

«Why?»

«...»

«Sasuk, why is this one crying?»

«Don’t mind him!»

«You're not even human!»

«Hey, cover up! Cover up! Quickly!»

This place... this place is a demon's dwelling.